

A PLAGUE of RATS and RUBBERVINES

The Growing Threat of Species Invasion

By Yvonne Baskin

the second half is devoted to a search for solutions. Baskin provides an abbreviated list of examples of introduced species and spends a good portion of the book to discussing ways we can slow down the spread of invasives and mitigate the impacts from species that are a permanent part of our landscapes. I say abbreviated because one could write volumes about all the documented cases of invasives that have impacted different regions of the globe.

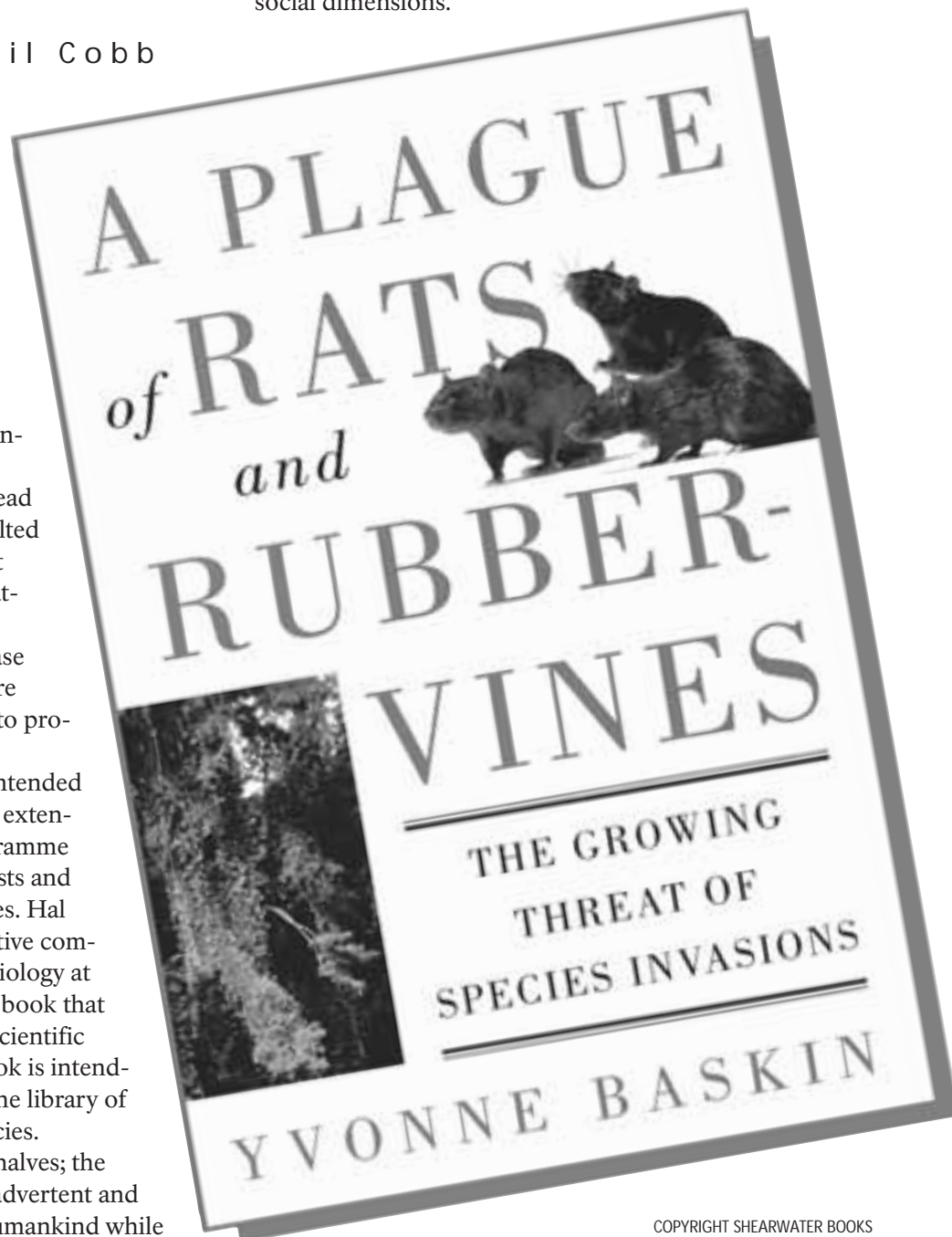
I enjoyed the way the book moves from descriptions of personal experiences to the larger context of the particular topic, with enough facts to educate readers but not overwhelm them. With each chapter there is a nice transition from the narratives to provisions of concise lists of facts about ecology, economics, and social dimensions.

A book review by Neil Cobb

Welcome to the Monogocene, a new geologic epoch characterized by “sameness or monotony,” whereby the distribution of biota are determined by the activities of humans via invasive species. The Monogocene is a facetious term suggested by Gordian Orians, which underscores the central role of human activity in determining global biodiversity. Specifically, our direct or indirect involvement in the spread of species throughout the globe has resulted in a large number of invasive exotics that will eventually determine biodiversity patterns on Earth. Baskin’s book warns us against the Monogocene by making the case against invasives. She also makes the more important case for reasonable solutions to protect native plants and animals.

Baskin states clearly that this book is intended to reach beyond scientists. It is partly an extension of the Global Invasive Species Programme (GISP), a partnership network of scientists and technical experts on invasive alien species. Hal Mooney, chairperson of the GISP executive committee and professor of environmental biology at Stanford University, wanted to publish a book that would reach a larger audience than the scientific community that launched GISP. This book is intended for the public and should be part of the library of anyone who is interested in invasive species.

The book is divided roughly into two halves; the first half provides descriptions of the inadvertent and purposeful introduction of species by humankind while



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Stories of personal travels around the globe provided nice intervening vignettes. I took pleasure in her novel-like descriptions of encounters with invasive species; I felt like I was reading *Jurassic Park* over again, but rather than a velociraptor appearing at the end of a paragraph, there was an insidious new invasive species.

Her book covers disease organisms as exotic species, an important category to emphasize and one that most people do not think of as invasive. The recent epidemic of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) really drives this point home and underscores the reality that with millions of people traveling daily across the globe, the potential for introducing devastating invasives overnight is very high. For those who do not appreciate

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the impact of something like cheatgrass, an invasive annual grass affecting western North America, disease organisms more directly deliver the message. Many of the invasions go unnoticed because the native species they eliminate do not capture newspaper headlines. That is the sad part of this story: if invasives eliminate unfamiliar species we do nothing. Because so many species have yet to be scientifically described, we will never know the full impact of invasives on the landscape.

The book provides an important historical perspective, a reminder that human activities have been spreading species for thousands of years. We have always tended to bring familiar animals and plants, or those that sustain us like crop plants, with us as we move about. Today millions of people moving about daily serve as potential agents of dispersal. Despite our awareness of the problems that come with introduced exotics, the increased connectedness of our global economy will strain our ability to prevent the spread of unwanted species.

Baskin's critical review of the role of the United States government in protecting native species from invasives is timely and poignant. She argues that the government has been lax in confronting the threat of invasive species despite the body of scientific evidence that suggests invasives have a tremendous negative effect on public and private lands, at great cost to the U.S. economy. She also notes that the United States was one of the few countries that did not ratify the 1992 biodiversity treaty.

Any author dealing with invasive species has a daunting task of formulating a realistic plan of action to mitigate the negative effects of invasives. I respect Baskin's prag-

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matic assessment of the situation, realizing that we must choose our battles carefully in this war against unwanted species. As a

group, invasives are here to stay, but there are ways in which we can realistically protect native biota. I find it encouraging to consider a realistic plan of action, and the book is careful not to overestimate the possibilities for protecting native biota. I appreciated the constant but subtle theme of saving native biota as the goal rather than the unrealistic goal of eliminating exotics.

Reading a book about invasive species is always difficult for me because the problem seems so overwhelming. This book shared a nice mix of caution and hope that I found comforting but honest. Overall the book is very successful as a nontechnical work for the layperson or scientist and is enjoyable to read.

About the author

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